



Reynolds, David. Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography [review]

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REVIEWS

DAVID S. REYNOLDS. *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. xii + 667 pp. \$35.

Estimates vary as to how many Whitman biographies there are now, not counting biographical critical studies and contemporary recollections of the bard, but the number is usually guessed to be in the twenties. Actually, there are now exactly fifteen, counting David S. Reynolds' *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. The history of Whitman biography is like the repainting of a cherished historical mansion. His biographies, for the most part, have been so many coats of paint, applied to previous coats. The first complete painting came with Richard Maurice Bucke's biography (touched up by the subject himself) in 1883. It was followed by so many coats (though Henry Bryan Binns in 1905 and Bliss Perry in 1906 did some minor scraping) until 1926, when Emory Holloway started over again with his Pulitzer-Prize winning life. Actually, the new foundation coat was mixed in 1921 with Holloway's collection of unknown Whitman pieces, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose*. The biography itself had no notes, but scholars never doubted that Holloway could document every biographical assertion (something that is not altogether true with Reynolds). Holloway sanded the house down to the primer and bare wood, and his work became the basis and reference point for biographies in 1938 and 1943 by Edgar Lee Masters and Henry Seidel Canby, respectively.

The first biographer (using the strict criteria suggested above) to mix the paint experimentally and write about Whitman as a homosexual was Roger Asselineau in 1954, becoming the third Frenchman to paint the Whitman house with an impressionistic brush after Leon Bazalgette (1908) and Jean Catel (1929). More generally, Asselineau was the first biographer to look at Whitman's life and work psychologically. *The Evolution of Walt Whitman* was soundly and originally researched, but the biography that stripped the house almost completely down to wood again was Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer* (1955). This was a "critical" biography, suggesting not only literary judgments but a definitive charting and analysis of the facts of the poet's life. It has stood as the standard biographical volume for forty years. Allen looked at manuscripts long before they were arranged in the Library of Congress and elsewhere. It has not been surpassed as a work of biographical scholarship by any of the volumes which followed—Justin Kaplan's life in 1980, Paul Zweig's biography in 1984, or Reynolds's cultural embellishment of the life in 1995. This is not to say that these biographies have not filled important voids in our appreciation of the poet or presented Whitman in a fresh light. I reviewed Kaplan and Zweig when their books first appeared. Suffice it to say that Reynolds's book joins them in this fine effort and indeed may surpass even Kaplan in some respects, if not in the art of biography, mainly by going be-

yond all his predecessors in the gathering of cultural facts. Yet even in the art of biography, Reynolds is competitive, presenting throughout a highly engaging narrative which never stops eliciting interesting and sometimes new if not always documented (to the specialist) information. Reynolds has published with a trade press in an attempt to reach a larger audience, and this effort means the notes get slighted: generally, only direct quotes are cited. Also, the notes are not keyed to individual pages but to chapters, making it very difficult to track the scholarly genealogy of ideas.

Reynolds has not stripped the house down again but has added some sturdy aluminum siding. He admits that he has completely trusted the accuracy of collected writings by Whitman, starting with Rodgers and Black's *The Gathering of the Forces* (1920) and Holloway's *Uncollected Poetry and Prose* and finishing with Joseph Jay Rubin's *The Historic Whitman* (1973). Allen, too, apparently trusted many of these sources but also added immensely to them. Reynolds adds biographical material, also, but his greatest contribution is his eloquent description of the American history through which Whitman moved. He has written a cultural biography, along the methodological line of his celebrated *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988), and he is brilliant in finding so many interesting new contexts for *Leaves of Grass*. Some reviewers have complained that Reynolds discusses everything *but* the poetry, but this is simply a false claim. Indeed the reason for the book is primarily the literature. It is just that Reynolds—living in the age of the New Historicism—believes that literature is strongly influenced by culture. When he discusses Whitman's poetry, therefore, it is always in the cultural/historical context, for that is the author's announced purpose.

Reynolds explores the participatory spirit of antebellum America and *Leaves of Grass*. We know from one of Whitman's reminiscences that the operas he heard were often attended by working-class people, who responded visibly and vigorously to the singers. (See Chapter Six in this regard, one of Reynolds's best chapters.) He also deepens our understanding of the influence of phrenology on Whitman's development as a poet and a transcendentalist. America has forgotten how seriously people took this pseudoscience in the 1850s. Whenever Orson Fowler advertised a series of lectures in New York or Brooklyn, he filled the house for weeks. Reynolds suggests that phrenology was as important a source of Whitman's self-reliance as Emerson and the transcendentalists. As to that other sexual ethicist, Sylvester Graham, he writes, "Just as Graham had said that masturbation leads to self-reproach and hatred, so Whitman's I speaks of the phallus as the 'treacherous tip of me.'"

In this book, Reynolds expands his thesis made in *Beneath the American Renaissance* that Whitman was one of the culture cleansers "familiar with slang but avoiding obscenity, comfortable with sex but circumventing pornography." He tried in "Song of Myself" to make sensationalism philosophically and socially restorative "instead of anarchic and hopeless." His sexual passages, Reynolds notes, generally transcend the body—as do Fowler's. All this is effective, but Reynolds gets into trouble, it seems to me, in writing about the famous foreground of *Leaves of Grass*. First, he tends to work the cultural action for more than it's worth, seldom passing up any opportunity to make a cultural reference in his discussion of the poet's life. He also tends to exagger-

ate the sensational elements of the poet's temperance fiction and gives no source (here and elsewhere for interesting tidbits) for the *Eagle* publication by Whitman of "a typical moral-reform poem about a heartless wealthy rake who regularly seduced women and thus drove them to prostitution."

Reynolds insists that same-sex relations before the war, especially before the Wilde scandals of the 1890s, were notably different from today. Male romantic relationship were common then—even homosexual acts did not stir up much attention. Unfortunately, Reynolds returns to this point again and again without adding much; yet he does well to remind us that the poetic passages deemed scandalous in *Leaves of Grass* belonged to "Song of Myself" and *Children of Adam*, not to *Calamus*, which the district attorney ignored when *Leaves of Grass* was "banned in Boston." We are also never altogether sure of Reynolds's position regarding Whitman's sexual orientation. "In reconstructing Whitman's life and times," he states in the introduction, "I have found much to admire as well as certain attitudes that are repellent. Such attitudes are not defensible, but they are historically explainable." His reference here is not altogether clear, but if it's the poet's suspected homosexuality, the comment sounds "homophobic." Possibly Reynolds is referring to illegal homosexuality, for he features in his chronicle the rumor that Whitman was tarred and feathered in Southold in 1840 or 1841 for the sexual molestation of one of his students (the legend, analyzed in Katherine Molinoff's 1966 pamphlet [*Walt Whitman at Southold*], gives both dates). Reynolds adds to his introductory caveat that he has tried "to adhere to the historical record instead of imposing today's views on the past," but he does not live up to this promise when he becomes the first biographer to include the Southold material.

The main reason previous biographers have passed over this rumor is that in the winters of 1840 and 1841 Whitman's whereabouts are fairly well documented as being at the other end of Long Island from Southold, a town next to Smithtown, where he did teach in the fall and winter terms of 1837-1838. Molinoff concedes at the outset of her pamphlet that there is no evidence of Whitman's having taught any farther east than Smithtown, but then immediately forgets that important information to state on p. 5 that he taught at the Locust Grove School in Southold (later called "Sodom School"—not because of Whitman's alleged sex crime, as Reynolds suggests, but because the shed-like schoolhouse was situated next to a graveyard, i.e., with reference to the biblical fates of Sodom and Gomorrah). She states that this possibility is supported by "several eminently reliable residents," but it all turns out to be a fabrication by a local historian described in one of the many letters Molinoff quotes as a demonstrable liar who "had an alarming ability to get facts where none existed." Wayland Jefferson, author of "Southold Town, 1639-1939," states that Whitman "taught one term—not too successfully—at the Sodom School in 1841." Jefferson later changed the date to 1840 for no apparent reason except perhaps to make it a better biographical fit. In a sense, Molinoff did Whitman scholarship a service by gathering together the contradictory fragments that make up the Southold story; her pamphlet allowed us to easily dismiss the story. Reynolds, our leading historian of sensational literature of the nineteenth century, tends to sensationalize his own book, even labelling

the claim (after Molinoff) as "The Trouble," which he revisits several times. His argument is that Whitman's great talent emerged from the hidden shame of the alleged event. He adopts the kind of homosexual imagery argued for by Michael Moon in his reading of the early fiction, saying of "Death in School-Room (A Fact)" that "One does not have to be a Freudian to see homoerotic connotations in the picture of a country teacher beating a supine boy's lower back." Isn't Reynolds here being as chronocentric as the New Historicists he pretends to part company with in the introduction? It's as if we aren't supposed to see any homosexuality in same-sex relations before Oscar Wilde, except in Whitman's fiction of a half century earlier. Reynolds also flatly rejects the New Orleans romance story for lack of factual evidence but ignores the same lack of evidence in reinforcing the sodomy claim in Southold.

Reynolds is generally severe in his criticisms of Whitman's post-war behavior and views, suggesting that he became racist, or more racist, in the face of Reconstruction policies. (One gets the feeling that the author's interest in Whitman wanes after the Civil War.) For example, he quotes a passage from "A Christmas Garland" that Whitman had taken out of the essay when it was collected in *Specimen Days*, but he fails to quote the sentence that originally followed the excision, which indicates that Whitman wanted blacks to develop self-reliance and do generally for themselves. Whitman was not bigoted against blacks because of their color or former slave status, something not even most abolitionists could claim. Reynolds also thinks Whitman was corrupted by the government bureaucracies he worked for after the war, losing generally his sympathy for the underdog and his enthusiasm for democracy, but the comments in Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* usually show the older poet to be tolerantly critical in questions of politics and political theory.

My complaints about Reynolds's biography, however, remain minor in the face of its achievements as a reconstruction of the stage across which Whitman walked. Whitman wanted, as he said in his famous Preface, America to absorb him "as affectionately as he [had] absorbed it." Generally, we have been led to think that Whitman failed, but Reynolds shows effectively how frequently Whitman's poems were accepted by magazines after the war. The country's apathy toward Whitman, Reynolds asserts, was mostly part of the poet's postwar myth of the Good Gray Poet whose art is shunned by a prudish literary establishment. He shows that the journalist in Whitman was in fact always at work, getting his story across. We are reminded that his Lincoln lectures often concluded with a reading of the popular "O Captain! My Captain!"—which Whitman had come to hate—instead of an excerpt from "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Whitman could compromise when he had to—at least after the war. Before the war, the record is clear that he was uncompromisingly committed to the Wilmot Proviso, if not altogether to the immediate abolition of slavery in the South. The Civil War was ultimately about the destiny of the West (whether honest, white labor would be degraded by slaves doing the same work), and its result changed the politically moderate-to-radical Whitman into a moderate conservative. He thought things had gone far enough and disapproved of the Radical Republicans' continuing efforts to degrade the defeated South with Reconstruction policies. The picture

of Whitman before and after the war, fully immersed in the politics and fads of his times, is a welcome and refreshing addition to Whitman scholarship. Reynolds has given us one of the best portraits of our best poet.

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MARTIN KLAMMER. *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, 176 pp.

What delights most about this work is Martin Klammer's argument that Whitman's attitudes toward race and slavery changed throughout his lifetime. The Whitman that Klammer gives us continually adjusted his beliefs to fit his own particular response to the political mood of the times. Klammer fortunately avoids the revisionist approach to Whitman's attitudes toward race and slavery: he does not criticize Whitman in terms of twentieth-century American thinking, but presents his views in terms of nineteenth-century American thinking. This allows Klammer to reveal Whitman within the milieu of nineteenth-century American culture. Against the background of contemporary nineteenth-century American attitudes toward race and slavery, Klammer effectively explains how Whitman differs from his contemporaries and how his different attitudes develop in a way that precipitates the creation of *Leaves of Grass*.

Klammer chronicles support for his discussion from between 1842, with the publication of Whitman's *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate*, and 1855, with the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Reminding readers that *Franklin Evans* represents Whitman's most popular work in the nineteenth-century, Klammer also identifies it as Whitman's most racist work. As such, Klammer uses *Franklin Evans* to establish Whitman's works in the nineteenth-century American milieu. The temperance novel also serves Klammer as the point of departure for Whitman as his attitudes toward race and slavery develop to a more radical acceptance and a more sympathetic treatment of African Americans, and to the eventual adoption of an anti-slavery posture. As Whitman's response to slavery and race develops more radically, so does his approach to literature, and particularly to poetry. The result is the radical poetry of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855.

During the late 1840s and the late 1850s in his various capacities as a journalist, Whitman engaged himself in the current slavery debates. His opposition to slavery at this time, however, was only secondary to his concerns about the effects of slavery upon the conditions of white labor. Careful not to make too much of Whitman's use of a catalog in an 1847 anti-slavery editorial, Klammer does suggest that Whitman's articulation of his new views toward slavery at least provoked him to new forms of expression. Indicative of his opposition to the extension of slavery, Whitman denounced slavery and promoted the Wilmot Proviso, a stand radical enough to get him fired from his